DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 949 EC 306 514

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TITLE What Preservice Teachers Are Surprised To Learn about--and from--Gifted Students.

PUB DATE 1998-04-00

NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.

DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Development; Elementary Secondary Education; *Gifted; Higher Education; *Knowledge Base for Teaching; *Preservice Teacher Education; Preservice Teachers; Professional Development; *Student Teaching; Summer Programs; *Teacher Attitudes

IDENTIFIERS *Differentiated Curriculum (Gifted)

ABSTRACT

This report discusses the outcomes of a study that drew upon the reflections and self-assessment of seven preservice teachers who served as assistants in a university-based summer program for gifted students. Of the preservice teachers, four were elementary education majors, two were early childhood majors, and one was a special education major. Findings indicate that: (1) the assistants judged their experiences working with gifted students as positive and beneficial to their professional development; (2) the assistants were highly motivated to make a difference in the lives of their future students; (3) five assistants had a higher level of commitment to teaching after the program; (4) when asked to compare their current knowledge base and competency level with the knowledge and competencies they possessed when they began their teacher preparation program, the assistants pointed out that they were not aware of the many dimensions of teaching; (5) the assistants recognized the value of collaborating with parents and colleagues; and (6) the assistants faced some of their stereotypes about gifted students and moved beyond those misconceptions. Guiding principles for curriculum differentiation for gifted students are provided. (Contains 26 references.) (CR)

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ED 420 949

What Preservice Teachers Are Surprised To Learn About--And From--Gifted Students

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Prepared for:

American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting

April, 1998

San Diego, California

EC 306514

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Abstract

The study described in this paper drew upon the reflections and self-assessments of preservice teachers to provide a window into how they viewed their own competencies, attitudes, and knowledge base with regard to education of the gifted. After many summers of conducting research projects which focused on gifted children, the authors turned their attention to the preservice teachers who served as assistants in a university-based summer program for gifted students. In so doing, they explored a small piece of the common ground which initial teacher preparation and education of the gifted share. Their research was designed to:

1. Engage preservice teachers in reflection and self-analysis regarding their experiences assisting in a summer program for gifted students.
2. Identify themes that emerged from preservice teachers' reflections, attitudes, and knowledge base regarding gifted students.
3. Recommend knowledge, skills, and dispositions which preservice teachers need to possess and display upon their entry to the teaching profession.
4. Offer insights regarding the role that gifted students can play in initial teacher preparation.
5. Compare and contrast preservice teachers' experiences assisting in a summer program for gifted students with other field experiences they have had.

Purpose

The report of the National Commission on Teaching and America' s Future, entitled What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future (1996), highlights the critical nature of preservice teacher preparation. As we embark on the new millennium, teacher educators and teachers face unprecedented challenges: increasing poverty and violence, decreasing familial support structures, rapid changes in the creation and consumption of knowledge, and more diverse student populations with magnified at-risk behaviors. Illinois' Superintendent of Education asserts that "The most critical variable in determining whether the schools will be able to succeed in meeting these demands and challenges will be the competencies and commitments of their teachers" (Spagnolo, 1997, p. 7).

As Illinois focuses on restructuring the teacher licensure system, the state is being challenged to chart a new course for preservice teacher preparation and to provide appropriate models. Many other states are also planning to reframe their teacher preparation programs. If we take seriously the assertion that high quality teachers are the most important element of successful learning and that capable teachers should be every child's birthright (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future Report, 1996), it becomes imperative for teacher educators to recruit and prepare the brightest and most capable individuals to teach.

Even a cursory glance at the relevant research indicates that, while teacher preparation and education of the gifted have been the focus of a great number of studies, the two areas have been considered in tandem much less frequently. It is our contention that teacher preparation and education of the gifted, do indeed, share many commonalties. In teacher preparation programs--as well as in gifted education programs--we are certainly expected to: respond to individual differences, provide an appropriate education for learners, differentiate curriculum based on learners' interests and needs, support a variety of learning styles and special needs, engage learners in the development of critical and creative thinking, facilitate the development of learners as leaders and

informed decision makers, set high expectations, promote lifelong learning, and empower learners.

Throughout our years of involvement in teacher preparation and education of the gifted, we have conducted a number of studies which focused on teacher preparation, as well as studies that focused on gifted children. However, we have never before undertaken a study that combined the two topics. After many summers of conducting research projects which focused on gifted children, we now have turned our attention to the preservice teachers who served as assistants in a university-based summer program for gifted students. In so doing, we have explored a small piece of the common ground which initial teacher preparation and education of the gifted share.

In exploring this "small piece of common ground" we crafted the following objectives to provide direction and focus to our study. Our research was designed to:

1. Engage preservice teachers in reflection and self-analysis regarding their experiences assisting in a summer program for gifted students.
2. Identify themes that emerged from preservice teachers' reflections, attitudes, and knowledge base regarding gifted students.
3. Recommend knowledge, skills, and dispositions which preservice teachers need to possess and display upon their entry to the teaching profession.
4. Offer insights regarding the role that gifted students can play in initial teacher preparation.
5. Compare and contrast preservice teachers' experiences assisting in a summer program for gifted students with other field experiences they have had.

Review of Literature

Studies which have juxtaposed teacher preparation and education of the gifted include efforts to identify mandates, models, and methodologies to prepare and assist teachers in meeting the needs of gifted students (Davison, 1996; Delany-Barmann & Minner, 1995; Howley, 1986; Jones, 1991; Maker, 1975) and efforts to identify teachers' perceptions of, and attitudes toward, gifted students (Ciscell, 1991; Lawrence & Glenn,

1994; Schack & Starko, 1990; Sparapani, 1995; Tomlinson, 1994). Others (Kiley Shepston & Jensen, 1996; Reid & McGuire, 1995; Taplin, 1996) offer recommendations for inservice and/or preservice teacher preparation.

In a multi-site case study, which included ten elementary schools and classrooms known for meeting the needs of high ability students through differentiated practices, a number of emerging themes which characterized the ten sites were identified (Westberg & Archambault, 1997). These themes included teachers' advanced knowledge and training, teachers' willingness to embrace change, collaboration, teachers' strategies for differentiating curriculum, instructional leadership, and educational cooperation. Interestingly, these key themes all focused on the preparation and role of the teacher.

Recommendations for Gifted Education

Neuroscience and cognitive psychology have provided us with new insights regarding what it means to be "gifted" or "talented" (National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent, 1993). The following definition, based on the federal Javits Gifted and Talented Education Act, reflects today's knowledge and thinking:

> Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas; possess an unusual leadership capacity; or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor. (National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent, 1993, no page number available)

The report goes on to suggest that schools should develop a gifted and talented student identification system that:

1. Seeks variety--looks throughout a range of disciplines for students with diverse talents;

2. Uses many assessment measures;
3. Is free of bias;
4. Is fluid;
5. Identifies potential; and
6. Assesses motivation.

Action recommendations which promote national excellence for our most talented students include:

1. Establishing challenging curriculum standards;
2. Establishing high-level learning opportunities;
3. Expanding opportunities for economically disadvantaged and minority children; and
4. Encouraging appropriate teacher preparation and technical assistance.

Recommendations for Reforming Teacher Preparation

Turning our attention to the literature on reforming and restructuring teacher preparation programs, we see a number of similarities between the recommendations for action listed above and the "Action Agenda for Change," which was discussed in the Report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996). The authors of that report challenged the nation to develop and implement an action plan that will result in significant, successful, long-term improvements in teaching and learning (What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future, 1996).

The report suggests that by the year 2006:

* All children will be taught by teachers who have the knowledge, skills, and commitments to teach children well;
* All teacher education programs will meet professional standards, or they will be closed;
* All teachers will have access to high-quality professional development and regular time for collegial work and planning;

* Both teachers and principals will be hired and retained based on their ability to meet professional standards of practice;
* Teachers' salaries will be based on their knowledge and skills; and
* Quality teaching will be the central investment of schools. Most education dollars will be spent on classroom teaching. (p. 63)

To accomplish these goals, five recommendations are proposed in the report:

1. Get serious about standards for both students and teachers;
2. Reinvent teacher preparation and professional development;
3. Fix teacher recruitment and put qualified teachers in every classroom;
4. Encourage and reward teacher knowledge and skill; and
5. Create schools that are organized for student and teacher success. (p. 64)

Challenging standards, high-quality teaching, and high-level learning opportunities are emphasized as key themes in the literature relevant to gifted education, as well as in the literature relevant to teacher preparation.

Preparing for Inclusion

Continuing to expand on the notion of comparing gifted education to teacher preparation, we move to the topic of inclusion. Vaughn (1996) and a group of her colleagues interviewed 26 special education teachers, eight Chapter 1 teachers, 25 general education teachers, and 15 teachers of the gifted. A majority of this group of teachers had strong negative feelings about inclusion. When asked to identify factors which affected the success of inclusion, teachers named limited teacher preparation, large class sizes, limited resources, and their concerns about the extent to which all students would benefit in an inclusionary classroom. The results of this study, once again, highlighted the importance of appropriate preservice teacher preparation, especially since teacher educators are responsible for preparing future teachers to work effectively and collaboratively in inclusionary settings.

What types of teacher preparation are appropriate for developing practitioners who are able to teach effectively in inclusionary classrooms? According to Hague and

Walker (1996), powerful learning theory and practice operate from the premise that the type of education that is provided for gifted children works well for all children. As teachers in two magnet sites integrated powerful learning theory and practice into their classrooms, their schools transformed into accelerated schools. The Powerful Learning Project involved opportunities for teachers to: work together, encourage reflective practices, participate in collegial coaching, record their teaching experiences in journals, and attend seminars to learn about student-centered, constructivist teaching practices.

Meeting gifted students' needs in an inclusionary classroom involves the teacher's willingness to adapt and give students an opportunity to choose, plan, and develop individual projects that add meaning and purpose to their education (Buckner, 1997). Effective strategies for adapting instruction and curriculum for gifted students include: (1) curriculum compacting; (2) involving students in community based activities which include videos, television programs, field trips, and guest speakers; (3) involving students in goal setting, predicting, determining cause and effect, following directions, making inferences, and analyzing data; (4) individual or small group projects in a self-selected problem or area of study; and (5) enrichment clusters which promote collaboration and critical thinking. In addition to Buckner's (1997) suggestions for strategies that teachers can implement in a best practice classroom, Shaklee (1997) reminds us that the gifted education field has a wealth of research and practice that can support the regular classroom teacher.

Preparing for Diversity

A pilot program launched in the spring of 1995 at Northern Arizona University, entitled "Diversity in Educational Contexts," was designed to prepare teachers to instruct the diverse students they will encounter in their public and private classrooms (Delaney-Barmann & Minner, 1995). The program addresses effective teaching of ethnic minority children, non-English speaking children, handicapped children, and gifted and talented children, as well as issues which relate to the differential treatment afforded boys and girls in U. S. schools. Preliminary results of the evaluation suggested that students were

able to transfer the knowledge and skills they learned into classroom situations, and they demonstrated the desire to know more about other cultures and people outside the context of the classroom. Faculty responses indicated that the opportunity to participate in such a diverse curriculum, and in on-going discussions of their experiences, provided students with unique and valuable opportunities to learn and reflect about issues they will face in the classroom.

There are many noticeable similarities between the Powerful Learning Project for teachers and the suggested strategies for adapting instruction and curriculum for gifted students. A review of the research on teacher preparation and gifted education reveals a number of such commonalties. With this supposition in mind, we describe the process that we utilized in our study to explore the common ground between teacher preparation and gifted education.

Methodology

The study described in this paper drew upon the reflections and self-assessments of preservice teachers to provide a window into how they viewed their own competencies, attitudes, and knowledge base with regard to education of the gifted. A combination of surveys, observations, self-analyses, reflections, and interviews was used to focus on the experiences of preservice teachers who served as assistants in a five-week summer program designed for gifted children from the age of four through ninth grade. Four-year olds through children entering second grade participate in the Summer of Wonder Enrichment Program, while students entering third grade through students entering ninth grade are required to submit eligibility information for the Summer of Wonder Gifted Program.

The responsibilities of the assistants included a variety of tasks, such as supervising students on field trips, implementing a pre-care program, assisting teachers with classes, preparing and distributing supplies and instructional materials, helping parents and students locate assigned classrooms, escorting younger students to and from classes, keeping records, and tabulating course evaluations and parent surveys. Although

assistants had no responsibility for planning student instruction, they did have ample opportunity for interaction with students, parents, and teachers.

The study was conducted over two consecutive summers, the first summer focusing on four student assistants and the second summer focusing on three different assistants. We met with the assistants to discuss their involvement in the study described here and to ask them to complete a survey which consisted of several open-ended items. In addition to assuring the assistants that they would be compensated for the time it took them to complete the surveys, we told them that: thoughtful and complete responses to the items would be appreciated, they should complete the survey without discussing either the survey or their responses with other assistants, and their responses would be held in confidence. After reviewing the assistants' responses, we then identified emerging patterns.

Data Sources

The preservice teachers who served as the focus of this study included four elementary education majors, two early childhood majors, and one special education major. All were Caucasian females, and five of the seven were of traditional college age, while the other two were in their mid-to late twenties. All of the preservice teachers were students who, at the time of study, were making acceptable progress in their programs of study. However, with regard to their academic competence, they did represent a relatively wide range of demonstrated achievement. Either one or both of the authors had prior knowledge of, and first-hand interaction with, six of the seven assistants. This knowledge and interaction were primarily the result of serving as their instructors in methods courses.

As indicated above, a combination of surveys, observations, self-analyses, reflection, and interviews was used to collect information regarding the perceptions, experiences, and reactions of these preservice teachers to their involvement in a five-week program designed for gifted children. Teacher assistants also were asked to

consider what they learned and how they can apply what they learned to their initial teacher preparation.

Findings

The framework for the results section correlates directly with the five objectives that we developed to provide focus for our goals and interests, as well as to provide direction for our research. Each of the following objectives will be discussed in the context of responses that were derived from our study.

1. Engage preservice teachers in reflection and self-analysis regarding their experiences assisting in a summer program for gifted students.
2. Identify themes that emerged from preservice teachers' reflections, attitudes, and knowledge base regarding gifted students.
3. Recommend knowledge, skills, and dispositions which preservice teachers need to possess and display upon their entry to the teaching profession.
4. Offer insights regarding the role that gifted students can play in initial teacher preparation.
5. Compare and contrast preservice teachers' experiences assisting in a summer program for gifted students with other field experiences they have had.

Objective 1. Engage Preservice Teachers in Reflection and Self-Analysis Regarding Their Experiences Assisting in a Summer Program for Gifted Students.

As we mentioned in the methodology section, a combination of surveys, observations, self-analyses, and interviews was used to assist preservice teachers in reflecting on their experiences during a five-week summer program in the summer of 1996 and the summer of 1997. The seven students and authors spent a great deal of time discussing, writing, observing, interviewing, and analyzing with regard to the themes that emerge in this paper. An enthusiastic final reflection, which was shared by one of the preservice teachers, was a typical response to the question, "What did you enjoy most about working as an assistant this summer?".

I learned a lot about teaching and interacting with the students, as well as with teachers and parents. I think this is the best way I could have spent my summer!

In another student's final reflection, the important learnings she shared focused on the relationships she built and the observations she made.

It was great just talking with the students--they were so interesting. Getting to know the directors was neat. I think you are both great people and mentors. Being able to interact with other teacher assistants, as well as the students, the teachers, and parents was really enjoyable.

Since reflection and self-analysis can serve as such powerful and critical variables in a preservice teacher preparation program, we were pleased with the thorough, well-thought-out responses that we received to our queries, comments, and requests.

Objective 2. Identify Themes that Emerged from Preservice Teachers' Reflections, Attitudes, and Knowledge Base (Regarding Gifted Students).

Commitment to Teaching. Commitment to teaching emerged as one major theme in the assistants' reflections. On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being low and 10 being high, the preservice teachers were asked to rate their commitment to teaching at the end of the summer program. The ratings ranged from 8 to 10, with a mean of 9.5, suggesting that these preservice teachers were highly motivated to make a difference in the lives of their future students.

* *I did not make the decision to teach lightly; a lot of thought went into this decision.*
* *I want to get out there and help students and motivate them to learn!*
* *I'll give it my best shot. I've witnessed the influences teachers have on students.*
* *I hope to serve as a model of a truly committed teacher for others.*
* *Being around some great teachers and lots of children this summer, and really enjoying myself, validates my decision to be a teacher.*

A few of the assistants expressed some of their overall concerns about teaching.

* *I sometimes get scared that I won't be able to come up with enough lessons that the students will enjoy and learn from.*
* *I've seen some of the problems and struggles teachers encounter, which makes me feel like, "Why would I subject myself to that?".*

Professional Growth/Development. The preservice teachers also were asked to rate their commitment to teaching at the time they began their teacher preparation program. Using the same rating scale explained above, the scores ranged between 7 and 10, with a mean of 8.4. Some of the assistants' comments focused on their perceived limitations.

* *I didn't realize how committed one needs to be to teaching when I began my preparation.*
* *As I look back, I remember how clueless I was!*
* *I had been a teacher's aide in the classroom and saw how things shouldn't be done. I wanted to make a difference.*

Preservice teachers were asked to reflect on whether their commitment to teaching had changed and, if so, to what would they attribute the change. Two of the assistants indicated that their commitment to teaching hadn't changed. The other five assistants offered the following reasons for their higher level of commitment to teaching:

* *Experience, time, and knowledge*
* *Seeing others' commitment to teaching has had a great impact on me.*
* *Being around children and teachers this summer has been enough to help me make a definite decision about teaching.*

Knowledge Base and Teaching Competencies. The assistants were asked to rate their teaching knowledge base and teaching competencies at the end of the summer program. Using the rating scale, with 1 being low and 10 being high, the scores ranged from 4 to 8 with a mean score of 6.7. The preservice teachers seemed to recognize that teaching and learning are lifelong processes.

* *. . . teachers are constantly learning . . .*

* *Although I think a 10 is almost impossible to reach, I guarantee that's what I will be setting my sights for in the years to come.*
* *I have steadily become more confident with my knowledge of theory and practice.*

When asked to compare their current knowledge base and competency level with the knowledge and competencies they possessed when they began their teacher preparation program, the students were willing to point out that they were not aware of the many dimensions of teaching. The ratings ranged from 2 to 5, with a mean of 3.7. Some of the assistants felt they had been taught inappropriately or had observed ineffective teaching practices.

* *I didn't realize how much there was to know!*
* *I was unaware of many of the new teaching strategies and knew nothing about classroom management or lesson planning.*
* *I had such a negative view from working as an aide.*
* *Many methods used to teach me, I will not use when teaching.*

Revisiting the topic of change, the assistants were asked if there were differences between their ratings of their current teaching knowledge base and teaching competencies and their second rating, which focused on the knowledge base and competencies they possessed when they entered the teacher preparation program. As you might have predicted, by the 3-point drop in the mean score, the students valued what they were learning in their teacher preparation program. Factors which students indicated as impacting their knowledge base and teaching competencies included:

* *Hard work, great field experiences, and a few awesome professors*
* *Working as a teacher's aide*
* *Field experiences and education classes*
* *Observing good teachers*

Collaboration: Teachers Are a Valuable Resource. The preservice teachers were very impressed with the Summer of Wonder Program teaching staff. This experience

provided the assistants with an opportunity to observe a variety of teachers working in a non-school, university setting with students who ranged in age from 4 through 14. Since the Summer of Wonder teachers are expected to incorporate "best practices," the assistants were able to observe, and participate in, many topic-focused courses which integrated several content areas (e.g., Hooked on Books, Get Your Head in the Clouds, Spinning Spiders, and Blood and Guts). When asked what they learned from the teachers, the assistants shared many enthusiastic responses.

* *I learned so many activities that I'll be able to use in my classroom.*
* *I learned how to organize and arrange learning centers, evaluate equipment and materials, and label shelving.*
* *I learned that reflection is a great way to end the day.*
* *The teachers were really good and had strengths in different areas.*
* *The majority of teachers seemed to truly love teaching.*
* *The teachers spent a lot of time preparing for the classes.*
* *Teachers must constantly be thinking of new, creative, and fun ways to teach.*

Collaboration: Parents Are a Valuable Resource. As well as learning a great deal from teachers, the preservice teachers also interacted with many parents. When asked to identify some of the things they learned from parents, the assistants had many comments.

* *Many parents are very concerned, involved, interested, and enthusiastic regarding their child's learning.*
* *Parents appreciate take-home activities.*
* *Most parents seemed to be very supportive of the children and receptive to the staff.*
* *It's important to involve parents as much as possible through newsletters, daily plans, and classroom activities.*
* *Some parents seemed pushy, but others were just very interested.*

Collaboration: Colleagues Are a Valuable Resource. On the whole, the assistants who worked together each summer learned to rely on one another. Many long-term friendships have evolved from the Summer of Wonder Program.

* *Everyone brought different strengths to the program.*
* *We worked well together and maintained a positive attitude.*
* *We all have many of the same concerns about teaching.*
* *I learned to always keep your sense of humor!*
* *I learned that some types of people are easier to work with than others.*

By reviewing the themes that emerged from preservice teachers' reflections, attitudes, and knowledge base, we can begin to weave a tapestry with the warp threads--those that function as the foundation and base of the tapestry. The themes that emerged in this study--the foundation of this tapestry--include commitment to teaching; professional growth; knowledge base and teaching competencies; and collaboration with teachers, parents, and colleagues.

Objective 3. Recommend Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions Which Preservice Teachers Need to Possess and Display upon Their Entry to the Teaching Profession.

The themes that emerged from the assistants' responses related to objective two seem to provide us with a reasonable place to begin when looking at the knowledge, skills, and dispositions which preservice teachers need to possess and display upon their entry into the teaching profession. First of all, teachers must have a strong commitment to teaching. In the context of this study, the assistants all reported that they were committed to teaching.

Secondly, teachers must be committed to professional growth and development. These preservice teachers, by virtue of the fact that they agreed to assist in this program for minimum wage, demonstrated considerable commitment to their own professional growth. They could have elected to work for a higher wage, but they chose experience over money.

The third theme that emerged, knowledge base and teaching competencies, relates most directly to this objective. Assistants sporadically addressed the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be an effective teacher. When asked to address tasks which they felt they performed well, assistants' responses seemed to focus on interpersonal and conflict resolution skills rather than on knowledge or dispositions.

* *I was able to help solve a conflict between two students.*
* *I handled parent and teacher requests in a professsional manner and communicated well with the students.*
* *I did a good job of responding to negative student behaviors.*
* *I greeted the parents and students when they arrived.*
* *I made students feel welcome and capable of making a positive contribution.*

When asked about tasks they would have liked to perform better, assistants seemed somewhat reluctant to respond. However, they did identify a few shortcomings.

* *I need to learn how to make what I am saying more clear to people.*
* *I would like to be able to deal with the negative behaviors of middle school students more effectively.*
* *I need to learn how to deal with discipline.*
* *Students who don't listen and follow directions were frustrating to work with.*
* *When a child told me that she didn't like one of the other assistants "because she's fat and eats all our M&Ms", I didn't know how to respond.*

The final dimension of this objective, which involves collaboration with teachers, parents, and colleagues, presents us with many challenges in preservice teacher education. Opportunities to collaborate are priceless. One assistant shared the following comment which illustrates the critical nature of collaboration.

Professors and other teacher assistants were friendly and easy to work with. I loved working with the teachers who were excellent! Being able to interact with students at a variety of age levels was really a good experience for me.

In the next section, which focuses on the role of the gifted in teacher preparation, we will revisit the knowledge, skills, and dispositions which preservice teachers need to develop before they enter the field.

Objective 4. Offer Insights Regarding the Role that Gifted Students Can Play in Initial Teacher Preparation.

Even though the assistants learned a great deal from their interactions with the teachers and the parents, the opportunities that they had to experience, interact with, and observe gifted students were unparalleled. The assistants were highly intrigued with many of the students. They also faced some of their stereotypes about gifted students head on and have now moved beyond those misconceptions.

* *I learned that "gifted" doesn't necessarily mean well-behaved.*
* *I was surprised that gifted students had a variety of personalities--I expected "nerdier" kids.*
* *Most of the children were very bright and truly had an interest in learning.*
* *I was very impressed with the gifted students--they wanted to be challenged.*
* *Just to hear the students talk about various subjects was amazing!*
* *Some gifted students feel a little intimidated when they are not always "at the top" of the class.*
* *When gifted students are engaged in higher-level thinking activities, they thrive!*
* *Gifted students can be quite creative--and demanding.*
* *Meaningful friendships and "fitting in" are very important to gifted children.*
* *Gifted students can be quite resourceful.*

* *The range of socioeconomic status was very broad--it was wonderful that scholarships were offered!*

When asked what attributes best describe gifted students, the assistants responded:

* *intelligent*
* *interested in learning*
* *learn more at a faster pace*
* *intuitive*
* *inquisitive*
* *creative*
* *unique*
* *funny, but serious*
* *challenging*
* *bright*

After offering their thoughts regarding attributes that describe gifted students, the assistants were asked whether they thought they were gifted. Only one assistant responded that she considered herself gifted, because she was "strongly talented" in dance.

Amusing anecdotes which emanated from our young friends in the enrichment program (4 and 5 year olds), reminded the assistants to laugh once in a while. A few "kids say the darndest things" anecdotes will hopefully bring a smile to your face as well.

* *"I know what halitosis is because I had it once."*
* *When making gingerbread houses, one child explained that she needed to eat the gumdrop so she could figure out what color it was.*
* *On a more serious note, using a globe as a visual aid, a four-year-old explained to the whole group where Singapore is located and how the rotation of the earth works. She then went on to illustrate, using a*

flashlight, that when it is daytime in Peoria, Illinois it is nighttime in Singapore.

Since it is teachers' responsibility to ensure that the needs of all their students are being met, including gifted students, it seems critically important that all preservice teachers have an opportunity to work with gifted students in an educational context during their teacher preparation program. Given the opportunity, gifted students can provide preservice teachers with valuable insights. These insights inform practice, and it is necessary that we take seriously appropriate practices in gifted education. An effective curriculum for students who are gifted is essentially a basic curriculum that has been modified to meet the needs of each gifted student. The unique characteristics of each learner should serve as the basis for a decision on how the curriculum should be modified (Feldhusen, Hansen, & Kennedy, 1989; Maker, 1982, TAG, 1989; VanTassel-Baska, 1988).

Developing curriculum for students who are gifted is a challenging, but necessary, task. The Leadership Training Institute (Passow, 1982) composed seven guiding principles for curriculum differentiation, which delineate some of the knowledge, skills, and disposition expectations that are required to teach gifted students.

1. The content of curricula for gifted students should focus on and be organized to include more elaborate, complex, and in-depth study of major ideas, problems, and themes that integrate knowledge within and across systems of thought.
2. Curricula for gifted students should allow for the development and application of productive thinking skills to enable students to reconceptualize existing knowledge and/or generate new knowledge.
3. Curricula for gifted students should enable them to explore constantly changing knowledge and information and develop the attitude that knowledge is worth pursuing in an open world.

4. Curricula for gifted students should encourage exposure to, selection of, and use of appropriate and specialized resources.
5. Curricula for gifted students should promote self-initiated and self-directed learning and growth.
6. Curricula for gifted students should provide for the development of self-understanding and the understanding of one's relationship to persons, societal institutions, nature, and culture.
7. Evaluations of curricula for gifted students should be conducted in accordance with the previously stated principles, stressing higher level thinking skills, creativity, and excellence in performance and products.

Interestingly enough, the guiding principles cited above have many similarities to those teacher education program restructuring guidelines which focus on teachers as leaders, constructivists, problem-solvers, and decision-makers.

Objective 5. Compare and Contrast Preservice Teachers' Experiences Assisting in a Summer Program for Gifted Students with Other Field Experiences They Have Had.

Assistants were asked to compare and contrast the experience of serving as Gifted Institute assistants with their clinical/field experiences. It is important to note that some of the assistants had completed their professional semester and novice teaching experiences, while others had not. The assistants shared many positive comments regarding their experiences with the Summer of Wonder programs.

* *This summer I felt like part of the classroom, but in my field experience I felt like an outsider looking in.*
* *Gifted Institute gave me a lot more hands-on experiences and interaction with a variety of teaching styles.*
* *This summer I was able to experience a "behind the scenes" look at what goes on in schools and classrooms everyday.*

* *Through my Gifted Institute experience, I was able to work with a variety of teachers, I had more contact with parents than in my clinical placement, and I was able to accompany classes on field trips.*
* *Gifted Institute is much more relaxed than a structured school.*
* *I had many opportunities to work with a variety of children in the Gifted Institute setting. Also, I think the teachers who teach in the Summer of Wonder Program are much better than the teachers with whom I've been placed for clinical experiences.*

In comparing this five-week summer program experience to their previous field experiences, assistants indicated that it provided them with more opportunity: to interact with and observe teachers of different grade levels, to interact with parents, for hands-on experiences and exposure to a variety of teaching styles, and for direct involvement in classes. These observations held true for comparisons to freshman and sophomore field experiences. However, the student who already had completed her junior level field experience commented that it provided her with more opportunities for instructional planning and actual teaching than her Gifted Institute experience did.

The field experience that one of the assistants found helpful in preparing her for the assistant position was Novice Teaching. In Novice Teaching, preservice teachers are placed in school-based classrooms for ten and one-half hours a week for a full semester. Throughout the semester, they develop and teach a unit and complete a number of other projects.

Conclusions

Overall, the preservice students involved in this study judged their experiences working with gifted students as positive and beneficial to their professional development. Based on their written responses, as well as on the anecdotes they shared throughout the summer, we concluded that these teacher assistants, not only learned about and from the gifted students, but also enjoyed interacting with them.

Inasmuch that all teachers will at some point encounter gifted students and that it is their responsibility to ensure that the needs of all students--including gifted students--are addressed, all teachers can benefit from experiences with gifted students. Certainly preservice teachers can benefit from the opportunity to work with gifted students in an educational context during their teacher preparation program. Even in the relatively brief period of five weeks, the preservice teachers involved in this study discovered some of their own misconceptions regarding gifted students, as well as some of the self-imposed and externally-imposed pressures placed upon gifted students. If one begins with the premise that initial teacher preparation programs have the responsibility to provide preservice teachers with a variety of experiences, then gifted students do, in fact, have a role to play in teacher preparation.

Just as gifted students can make a contribution to the development of preservice teachers, an analysis of gifted education programs and teacher preparation programs reveals that they often are based on similar guiding principles. Particularly when teacher education programs view teachers as leaders, constructivists, problem-solvers, and decision-makers, they share many commonalties with programs designed for gifted learners. Such teacher preparation programs--as well as gifted education programs--are designed to: respond to individual differences, provide an appropriate education for learners, differentiate curriculum based on learners' interests and needs, support a variety of learning styles and special needs, engage learners in the development of critical and creative thinking, facilitate the development of learners as leaders and informed decision makers, set high expectations, promote lifelong learning, and empower learners.

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